

CIA 8-02

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SEC 4-01.2 Ed. Op.

Front Page / Edit Page / Other Page

WORCESTER, MASS.
TELEGRAM

M. 58,744
S. 102,435

JAN 16 1967

Overseeing the CIA

The Central Intelligence Agency is probably the major spying operation of the United States, although other agencies are in the field.

For a long time, there have been complaints that the CIA was operating in its own private world; that some of its activities around the world have added up to making foreign policy — which is not supposed to be its job.

CIA people point out that most of its operations consist not of cloak-and-dagger espionage, but of clipping stories and assembling information for government policy makers. That has led to another criticism: that the agency is a blossoming bureaucracy, secretly wasting good public money.

The congressional watchdog for CIA has been a special subcommittee headed by Sen. R.B. Russell of Georgia. It includes senior members from the Senate Appropriations and Armed Services committees — members who are acceptable to the CIA.

For some time, Sen. J. William Fulbright of Arkansas has been trying to cut his Foreign Relations Committee in on the watchdogging. This produced that great confrontation of last August, when the Senate went into extraordinary secret session for five hours.

Sen. Russell charged Fulbright with trying to "muscle in" on the CIA committee. Dark hints were dropped by Fulbright's critics that his men

couldn't be trusted with national secrets. In the end, the Senate voted overwhelmingly for Russell and against Fulbright.

It is somewhat surprising then, that Russell has now quietly invited Fulbright and two of his colleagues, Sens. Mike Mansfield of Montana and Bourke B. Hickenlooper of Iowa, to sit in with the CIA committee.

It is also reassuring. It deals head-on with the valid argument that Senate experts in foreign affairs ought to have some direct knowledge of CIA activities that touch on that field. If this inhibits the CIA from such fiascoes as the Bay of Pigs, so much the better. In practice, it is not likely to damage any worthwhile activities of the agency.

Mansfield, Hickenlooper, and particularly Fulbright have not been shy in talking about foreign affairs, and criticizing the policies of various administrations over the years. But none of them has been seriously regarded by their informed colleagues as likely to give away any legitimate secrets.

Sen. Russell's move is both conciliatory and wise. Whether many Americans like it or not, the CIA inevitably has an impact on U.S. policy around the world in these complicated times. The agency can't be allowed to operate as a largely free agent, and shouldn't want to. Broader oversight is needed. Sen. Russell has acted to provide it.